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THE TEACHING OF JESUS.

VI. THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

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Kingdom of God—as connected with the Old Testament conception—defined as to its limits and essential fact;—conditions of participation;—characterized as spiritual—as both subjective and objective in character—as capable of growth—represented as in development and in completion.—Quotation from Pascal.

“The kingdom of God” is one of the commonest phrases which we hear on the lips of Jesus. He has nowhere defined it and we can derive a definition of it only from his sayings as to its nature and from the conditions which he prescribed for participating in it. The negative statements of Jesus as to what it is *not*, and the contrast in which it stands to the popular Jewish idea regarding the Messianic kingdom, also throw important light upon its meaning.

The term, no doubt, stands connected with the Old Testament conception which is so well embodied in a word of Josephus which has now passed into current speech, viz., “theocracy.” The idea of the theocracy was that God is the ruler in human affairs. In Old Testament times this idea was embodied in a national organization which was at once a state and a church. To the Jewish mind the Jewish nation was synonymous with the kingdom of God. Jesus evidently takes up the Jewish idea in general, but without its limitations. For his mind the kingdom of God is something immeasurably larger than the Israelitish state.

“The kingdom of God” designates something more essentially spiritual than either a state or a church can ever be. Its limits cannot be marked off by the boundaries of an organization. There may be those within the pale of the outward, visible church

who are not true members of the kingdom of God—tares among the wheat. In all Christian ages there have been some outside the church who have belonged to the kingdom. Jesus spoke of “other sheep” which he had which were not of the Jewish fold—true children of God who were scattered abroad even among the heathen peoples—whom he would bring into his flock; and if there were such then outside Judaism, there have, no doubt, been such ever since outside historic and avowed Christianity.

I suppose that the kingdom of God includes all God’s faithful and obedient children in all times and places. Who these are in actual fact, it is beyond the wisdom and province of man definitely to say. The conditions whose fulfilment makes men members of the kingdom are chiefly internal and spiritual, and only he who perfectly knows the human heart can pronounce that judgment. By the kingdom of God I understand what is commonly meant by the “invisible church,” that is, the whole spiritual commonwealth of God’s children, the true company of all faithful people. The organized or visible church in all its parts and branches—the church catholic or universal—represents more fully than any and all other institutions the kingdom of God on earth, but the two are not synonymous nor conterminous. The kingdom of God is more and greater than the church.

The kingdom of God is the reign or rule of God, and all in whom God reigns, that is, all who obey, trust and serve him, are members of his kingdom. The phrase which is peculiar to Matthew, “the kingdom of heaven,” has the same meaning. It is the total company in whom heavenly laws and principles hold sway, and to it belong all who are trying to live in the spirit of that petition of our Lord’s prayer: “Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” This conception of the subject we will now test by reference to some of the most important sayings of Jesus which bear upon the nature of his kingdom.

Take, for example, the beatitudes in the sermon on the mount (Matt. 5 : 1–12). Jesus begins by saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” the humble, those who feel themselves spiritually needy and dependent, “for theirs is the kingdom of

heaven;" the kingdom is for such; to them it of right belongs; it *is* theirs. Here is described a certain temper of mind, a certain disposition which is, at least, *one* condition of membership in the kingdom. In the succeeding beatitudes the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is used but once (verse 10), but it is evident that the other blessings which are promised to those who fulfil the conditions specified are practically synonymous with the possession of the kingdom. When, for example, he says that the pure in heart shall see God, and that peacemakers shall be called sons of God, he surely means that these are members of God's kingdom. We may therefore say with all confidence that such qualities as meekness, desire after righteousness, mercifulness, purity of heart, and peacemaking do, by their very nature, make men members of the kingdom of heaven. These qualities represent in human character the true heavenly motives and principles which have their origin in God's own perfect nature and which in man constitute the perfection of personal life. Membership in the kingdom means to "see God," that is, to live in obedience and fellowship with him; it means to be a son of God, that is, to be akin to him in the spirit of one's action, to be ruled by love which is the sum of God's own glorious and holy perfections (see Matt. 5 : 43-48).

It is involved in the conceptions which we have reviewed that the kingdom is spiritual in its nature. It is not an outward organization, like a human government. Its laws are the motives and principles of goodness. This idea it was impossible for the people of Jesus' own time to grasp. They were so accustomed to regard the kingdom of God as identical with their own state, that they could only conceive of the coming kingdom as a renewed and purified Israel. Notwithstanding all the explanations which Jesus made regarding the spiritual nature of his kingdom, his disciples continued to think of it as having an outward, political form. When, for example, after the Master's death two of his disciples were journeying toward Emmaus, and Jesus joined them (though they knew him not), they said to him: "We hoped that it was he which should redeem Israel" (Luke 23 : 21); they thought that the death of Jesus meant the failure

of all their hopes in regard to the establishment of the kingdom of God. Clearly they had expected that, during his lifetime, he would reorganize and reconstitute the nation in greater glory and power than it had ever known. The Messiah was to be a kind of second David who should rescue Israel from oppression and trample down her enemies.

The same popular idea of the kingdom meets us in the request of James and John that they might sit, one on his right hand, and the other on his left in his glory (Mark 10 : 37). Their thought of participation in his kingdom was that of attaining a high place in a world-empire. How striking is the contrast between this idea and that which Jesus expounds to them, that service and sacrifice are the laws of his kingdom, and that he who gives most to others, not he who seeks most for himself, shall have the highest place in it.

The current idea is illustrated in the question which the disciples put to Jesus after the resurrection: "Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The thought which was in their minds was the same as that which is alluded to when we are told that Jesus spoke a certain parable "because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they (the disciples) supposed that the kingdom of God was immediately to appear" (Luke 19:11). Their idea evidently was that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to inaugurate the new *régime*. The kingdom was, in their view, something that was to "appear" in outward pomp and power. How different the idea of Jesus as set forth in the words: "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo, here! or, There! for lo, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20, 21). It seems to me probable that the phrase which is rendered in our versions "within you," should be translated as in the margin of the Revised Version, "in the midst of you," or "among you." Jesus is here answering the question of the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God should come and to them he could hardly say that the kingdom of God was *within* them. But, on either rendering, the invisible, spiritual nature of the kingdom is set forth in contrast to the idea that it was to "appear" in outward

demonstration so that men could say ; Lo, here, or Lo there it is. The same conception is embodied in the Lord's prayer, where the petition: "Thy kingdom come" is immediately followed and explained by the words: "thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." The kingdom of God comes in proportion as God's will is done among men.

From what has been said it will be seen that the kingdom has both a subjective and an objective character. It is something real and potent in the world; it is composed of a certain number of persons; it is a great commonwealth or fellowship. But its members are not bound together by any outward tie, such as a common language or ancestry, or adherence to some particular form of civil or ecclesiastical polity. The bond which unites its members is the unity of spirit. They are one in him who is the head of the kingdom, Jesus Christ. The kingdom is thus an organic, spiritual society whose members are one through common relations of love and loyalty to Christ. This unity underlies all the more superficial differences of Christians and embraces all who accept and follow such a measure of the light of truths as they have received, even though they have not known the historic Christ, since all revelation is through Christ who is the perpetual "light of men," "the true light which lighteth every man coming into the world" (John 1:4, 9).

But there is another prominent aspect of the teaching of Jesus concerning the kingdom of God which remains to be considered. The kingdom is represented as a growing affair. How many of the parables of Jesus set forth this idea. The kingdom is like seed sown, like a mustard seed which becomes a great plant, like leaven. One of the most interesting parables of this sort is preserved by Mark alone (4:26-29). It compares the kingdom of God to the process of sowing and waiting while the seed slowly and mysteriously germinates, springs up, and develops through the stages of growth until at last the grain is ready for the sickle. This parable may represent the development of the kingdom in the individual or its expansion in society. In either case, it pictures its progress as an organic, enlarging

process which moves forward through the operation of divine forces toward the appointed goal.

It results from this conception of the development of the kingdom that the phrase "kingdom of God" may especially emphasize, now one, now another, stage of the great process. In an important sense the kingdom of God came into the world when the King himself came into humanity. Hence when John proclaimed the manifestation of the Christ he said: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." The term is quite commonly used to designate especially the *completion* of the kingdom in the future world. Thus Jesus is said to come in his kingdom, that is, at its consummation, and he speaks of drinking new wine with his disciples in his kingdom, meaning in the heavenly world.

This variation of usage is the natural consequence of the largeness of the idea. God's kingdom has always been in the world, yet in a special manner did it come when Christ came. It is here now, and yet in an important sense it is future. It is present in its imperfect and developing form; only in the future world will it be perfected.

The phrase under review is especially characteristic of the synoptic Gospels. It is not frequently used elsewhere in the New Testament. It is employed, for example, in but two passages in the Gospel of John, in both cases in the sense which we have found to be the prevailing one in the Synoptists. One passage is: "Except a man be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (3:3). The meaning is that a spiritual renewal, the birth of new character, is necessary to participation in the kingdom. The condition of "seeing" it clearly marks its nature as spiritual. In the other passage Jesus says: "My kingdom is not of this world," etc. (18:36). In the connection Pilate is questioning him as to whether he claims to be king of the Jews. Jesus does not deny the claim but strenuously asserts that he is a king in no merely outward or political sense. His kingdom partakes of a higher nature; it is heavenly, spiritual, divine.

This brief study of the idea of the kingdom may fitly close

with a paragraph from Pascal in which he eloquently sets forth the true glory of moral and spiritual kingship as supremely illustrated in the character and work of Christ : "The saints have their empire, their renown, their victory, their lustre, and have no need of material or intellectual grandness, with which they have no relation, for they neither add to them, nor take from them. They are seen of God and angels, and not by body and curious intellect : God is sufficient for them.

"Jesus Christ, without wealth, and without any outward production of science, is in his order holiness. He gave no inventions, he did not reign; but he was humble, patient, holy, holy, holy to God, terrible to demons, without any sin. Oh, with what great pomp, and with what prodigious magnificence did he come to the eyes of the heart and the eyes which see wisdom ! It would have been useless for our Lord Jesus Christ, in order to appear with splendor in his reign of holiness, to come as a king : but with what a splendor of his own order has he indeed come !"¹

¹ *Thoughts*, ch. xix. 1.